A Visitor to the Museum

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The Arrival

The wind moved slow and heavy over the cracked earth, carrying with it a bitter tang of salt and smoke. Dust rose in swirls from every footfall, clinging to skin and fabric like a curse that had forgotten its origin. The sky hung pale and indifferent, smeared with the shadow of a sun no longer fierce. Out beyond the dunes, beyond the wrecked road and the rusting tracks, the sea slept in silence, its breath drawn back in an unseen tide.

A figure appeared on the road, walking without haste yet with purpose. The boots he wore were caked with dried mud, his coat sun-bleached and heavy with time. He bore no name, and none called to him. In the remains of cities he had shed all identity. Now he came simply as The Visitor.

He paused by a sagging post where remnants of signs had once given warning. Ahead, the edge of the settlement emerged from a screen of heat and dust—a low sprawl of wind-worn houses and boarded shops leaning against one another like dying animals. He approached slowly. A boy watched him from behind a corrugated metal fence. A man on a stool squinted with open contempt. No one greeted him.

"Where's the railroad line around here?" the Visitor asked, his voice dry.

No answer.

He tried again. "I'm looking for the dump train."

A woman emerged from a doorway, her apron stiff with flour and ash. She looked at him with practiced wariness but not hostility. Her eyes, deep-set and clever, narrowed slightly.

"It doesn’t stop regular. You wait long enough, it comes. Or it doesn’t."

"The garbage train," he said again. "Where does it stop?"

She gestured vaguely behind her. "Behind the tavern. End of the storage line. Come inside if you want to wait. There's dust out here that'll rot your lungs."

The man on the stool spat.

The Visitor hesitated, then followed the woman into the low building. The air inside was no better—thick with heat and the smell of mold—but it was dim and quiet. A tin kettle steamed on a rusted stove. Curtains hung limp and gray over the windows, where flames danced behind the glass, burning in shallow bowls set on the sills.

He glanced at them.

"To keep them out," the woman said.

"Who?"

"The degenerates. There's a reservation nearby. They climb through the windows at night. Fire keeps them away. They're scared of it. Remember that."

The Visitor gave a small nod. She poured him a glass of water from a chipped jug.

"The cups are dirty," she said. "So is the water. You want clean, you wait for the rain."

He drank.

"You passing through?" she asked.

"I'm here to visit the Museum."

She laughed without humor. "That’s rich. Nobody goes there anymore. Many try. Few make it back."

He said nothing.

"I'm Vera. Vera Majorova. I run the guesthouse. We have rooms. Reasonable prices. Free board if you take meals."

"I'm not staying long."

She smiled faintly. "Nobody stays long. But it gets late fast here."

The Visitor looked out the window again, toward the direction of the sea, where the sky seemed to darken unnaturally.

Vera followed his gaze. "First time here?"

He nodded once.

"Then you don't understand the sea. It's no joke."

The silence between them stretched. Somewhere below, muffled behind layers of floorboards, someone coughed—a long, wet, broken sound.

The Visitor turned toward the sound. Vera said nothing, only watched him with a gaze that held both pity and a warning.

The dust outside began to rise again, drawn by the growing breath of the sea.

The hallway was dim and narrow, lined with family portraits so thick with grime they could have been strangers or saints. Vera led him through it with familiarity, her steps soundless on the warped boards. The walls pulsed faintly with heat, as if the house breathed in slow, shallow gasps. She opened a door and motioned him inside.

“You can sit. I’ll get something for your throat.”

He settled into a chair that creaked under his weight. The room smelled of salt and old paper. A half-shuttered window revealed a patch of yard where nothing grew. True to her word, Vera returned with a tin mug half-filled with warm water.

“Drink it slowly,” she said. “It’s the dust. Gets into everything. Lungs, blood, thoughts. Some say it’s what makes the degenerates the way they are.”

He sipped. It tasted of rust and stone.

She leaned against the doorframe, arms folded. “They live past the ridge, on a reservation. You’ll see them if you stay long enough. Not much to them—shrunken heads, empty stares. Can’t speak proper. Most can’t count to five.”

“What happened to them?”

“No one really knows. Some say it’s the fallout, others say they were always like that. Filthy blood, bad seeds. They multiply quick, though. Every year more born like them. Forty percent now. Maybe more.”

Her tone was flat. Not cruel—only tired. As if she were reciting facts learned long ago and repeated too often.

Footsteps scraped overhead. A moment later, a door opened and slammed. A figure came down the stairs slowly, awkwardly—an old man, shirtless, eyes vague and staring. His beard hung in uneven tufts, and his skin bore the gray tint of long illness or deep confusion. He muttered something as he passed the room, then wandered off toward the kitchen.

Vera called out without turning her head. “Father, put some clothes on!”

There was no reply.

“Pay no attention,” she said quietly. “He’s mad. Been that way since the melt. Used to be someone. Ran the inspection station. Now he talks to birds and shadows.”

The Visitor watched the man vanish around a corner.

“You keep him here?” he asked.

“He refuses to leave. Says this house is all he remembers. Says it’ll be the last thing he sees before the water takes it all.”

She walked across the room and closed the door. For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The walls clicked and groaned with settling heat. Outside, the wind had stilled completely.

The Visitor finished the water and set the mug down.

“I’ll need to reach the sea,” he said. “When the tide goes out.”

“You have time,” Vera answered. “The low tide lasts seven days. Three to the Museum, three back. One for the Mound, if you believe in such things.”

He didn’t answer.

She moved toward the door. “Get some rest. I’ll bring coffee soon. It’s bitter, but it clears the lungs.”

She left, and he sat alone in the quiet. The house held its silence like a wound. Somewhere in the walls, something breathed—soft, ragged, and waiting.

The lamp in the hallway flickered as dusk pressed its face against the windows. Vera returned with a tray—coffee in enamel cups, a chipped plate of bread, and a faint apology in her expression. A man followed behind her, broad-shouldered and sharp-eyed, with the kind of face that had forgotten how to smile properly.

“This is my brother,” she said. “Vadim.”

The Visitor nodded. Vadim did not.

They sat at the table, the three of them, with the sea sighing somewhere in the distance like a beast dreaming of hunger. Vadim stared at the Visitor over the rim of his cup.

“You said you're going to the Museum,” he said, voice low and dry. “Why?”

“To see it.”

Vadim snorted. “You think you’ll find something there? Pictures, statues, truth?”

“I don’t want pictures.”

“Then what? Enlightenment?” Vadim leaned forward. “You know how many people walk out there when the tide goes? Dozens, every season. They come back sick or not at all. Some lose their minds halfway across. Some lose the sun, and then the water eats them.”

The Visitor’s voice was calm. “They told me the tide stays out seven days.”

“If you walk straight. If you don’t get lost. If the wind doesn’t shift the sand and blind you. If your legs don’t give out.”

Vera sighed. “He’s always like this. Some folks made it back.”

“Some,” Vadim muttered. “Not enough to matter.”

The Visitor turned to him. “What’s it like, when the sea retreats?”

Vadim’s eyes narrowed. “A desert. Cracked salt plains and bones. Old metal. Fish with no eyes. The smell makes your stomach turn inside out. And then, if you make it far enough, you see the ruins.”

“The Museum.”

Vadim nodded. “What’s left of it. Walls eaten by brine. Rooms full of silence and ash. You won’t find answers there.”

“Still, I have to see it,” the Visitor said.

Vadim leaned back. “People think it holds something sacred. Or cursed. They read the old texts, talk about the Mound, about prophecy. It’s nonsense.”

“But people believed it once,” the Visitor said.

“People believe in many things. That doesn’t make it real.”

Vera spoke softly, almost to herself. “But still, we ask. We open the book and point, and it says, ‘Neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.’ What does that mean?”

No one answered. The words settled into the dust.

The Visitor folded his hands on the table. “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

Vadim raised his eyebrows. “A line from a book doesn’t change the world.”

“But it speaks of it.”

“Speaks of ghosts,” Vadim said. “Speaks of ruins. Of hopes buried under water. But if there is a God, he has turned his face from us.”

The Visitor looked toward the darkened window.

“Then why does the tide return?”

No one spoke. Outside, the firelight on the windows began to flicker against the growing night, as if warning something unseen not to come closer.

Vadim unrolled the map across the table, the brittle paper crackling beneath his fingers. Lines, faint and smudged, marked the shoreline and the crumbled roads leading nowhere. He tapped a dull nail at a curve in the coast.

“You’ll start from here. There’s a path, mostly dry when the tide falls. But it twists. The sea floor isn’t flat. Slime in some places. Craters where the old pipes broke. You’ll be counting every step.”

The Visitor traced the line with his eyes.

“Here,” Vadim said, pointing again. “That’s where they say the Museum stands. Or what’s left of it.”

“What about the Mound?”

Vadim exhaled sharply. “Another superstition. A hill, a rock, a pile of dirt—who knows? The degenerates call it sacred. They think it’s where the world began. Or where it ends.”

Vera, who had been quiet, leaned in. “They gather around it during the low tide. Every year. For the Feast of Branches.”

The Visitor looked up. “Feast?”

She nodded. “It’s a ritual. They burn branches, sing hymns, chant. They say it’s the only time the gates of their world open. The priests come out from wherever they hide. It’s... their holy day.”

Vadim scoffed. “It’s hysteria. A collective fit. Religious psychosis. What else do you expect from people raised in filth and shadow?”

The Visitor’s gaze returned to the map. “But they believe.”

Vera looked at him carefully. “They do. They pray with their whole bodies. They throw themselves into the mud. Sometimes... they cry out as if they hear voices.”

He folded the map slowly. “And you’ve seen it?”

She hesitated. “Once. From a distance. When I was younger.”

Vadim made a dismissive sound. “She shouldn’t have gone.”

The Visitor placed the map in his coat.

“They’re afraid of fire, you said?”

Vadim nodded. “Terrified of it. But during the Feast, they light the branches themselves. That’s the strangest part. Like they worship what they fear.”

“Don’t we all?” the Visitor asked.

No one replied.

Vera stood, brushing crumbs from her lap. “Best not to speak of the Museum in front of them. Or the Mound. It stirs them.”

The Visitor looked at the closed door, beyond which muffled sounds now came—a rhythmic shuffling, a low murmur, like voices trapped in sleep.

“What do they believe waits there?” he asked.

Vera whispered, “Salvation.”

Vadim muttered, “Delusion.”

The Visitor said nothing, but his hand lingered on the place where the Mound was drawn, a faint circle at the end of a broken line.

Night came without transition, as if the sun had been extinguished by unseen hands. The sky outside pressed down, bruised and wide, and the wind carried with it the dry scent of salt decay. Within the house, the firebowls on the windows had burned low to coals, casting long shadows across the wooden floor. Vera showed the Visitor to a room on the upper floor—

sparse, with a low bed, a cracked mirror, and a washbasin streaked with rust. She lit a small lamp and placed it on the sill.

“If it goes out,” she said, “relight it. Sometimes the wind sneaks in through the cracks.”

He nodded. Her footsteps faded down the hall. Alone now, he sat on the edge of the bed, his coat still draped over his shoulders. He listened.

At first, there was only the settling groan of the house. Then, beneath that, something else—low murmurs, guttural and slow. Moans, soft at first, then louder. Then the unmistakable sound of weeping.

It rose from below the floor, from the basement where Vera’s “servants” slept. Not just one voice, but many. Sometimes overlapping, sometimes in unison. Like a chorus of grief buried in the earth, sounding through wood and dust and time.

“Let me out of here,” a voice whispered.

Then another. “Let me out... let me out...”

He stood and crossed to the door, placing his hand on it without opening. The weeping rose and fell like a tide. The Visitor turned back and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Sleep did not come quickly. When it did, it brought no peace.

In dreams, he walked the seabed. The water had fled, and in its absence the world was hollowed out. Towers leaned like broken teeth. Streets stretched into nowhere. The city beneath the waves was not dead, but sleeping—breathing with unseen lungs, dreaming of judgment.

Statues turned as he passed, eyeless and cracked. From atop a hill of stone and ash stood the Mound, lit from within by a fire that did not burn. Voices echoed through the salt air.

“And he shall not know his mystery…”

“His Angel is Sorrow…”

The Visitor reached toward a door at the base of the hill. Behind it, endless blackness breathed warm against his skin.

He woke suddenly, chest heaving, sweat stinging his eyes.

Outside, the wind had died. In the hallway, someone whispered.

Downstairs, the weeping continued, soft and constant, like a prayer too broken to rise.

The Degenerates

The dining room was warmer than the rest of the house, though not from comfort. Heat radiated from a rusted iron stove, and the air hung thick with the scent of boiled roots, grease, and the faint acrid smoke that clung to everything in the settlement. A table had been set—mismatched plates, dented utensils, bread stacked in a chipped basin. The family gathered without ceremony.

The Visitor sat at the far end, across from Vera and beside Vadim, whose sharpness did not fade with the hour. A man with thinning hair and a perpetual smirk sat next to him—Aleksandr Rasinski, Vera's husband, introduced earlier with a nod and a grunt. The old man, half-dressed and humming nonsense, sat at the head of the table, ignored by all.

Two figures entered silently from the kitchen. They moved cautiously, eyes lowered. A boy and girl—perhaps siblings, perhaps not—thin, pale, their hair cut unevenly. They carried bowls and cups, placed them with care, and did not speak.

"The children," Vera said, noticing the Visitor's glance. "They help around the house. From the reservation."

"Servants?" he asked quietly.

"Something like that," she answered. "Distant relatives, if you believe the records. We're educating them. As best we can."

"They can barely hold a spoon," Vadim muttered. "The girl still forgets which hand to use. I wouldn't call it education. More like conditioning."

Vera cast him a glance but said nothing.

Aleksandr leaned forward. "You should've seen them when they first came. Couldn't even stand straight. Covered in sores, filthy, wouldn't stop humming. Like animals."

"They're quiet now," Vera said.

"Because they're afraid," Vadim replied. "Fear teaches faster than kindness."

The Visitor looked at the boy, who stared ahead without blinking. His eyes were dull but not vacant—like he was listening to something distant, something no one else could hear.

Vadim continued, voice sharper. "Every year, more of them. Forty percent of births. Degenerate. Diseased. Useless. We try to track them, contain them, but the numbers keep growing. One day they'll outnumber us."

"They're still people," Vera said softly.

"Barely."

The old man at the table muttered something incoherent and laughed.

Aleksandr poured himself a drink. “You can’t blame the children. It’s the soil, the air. Everything’s poisoned. If not in body, then in soul.”

“God’s judgment,” the old man said suddenly, and then giggled.

The Visitor ate quietly, the food tasteless. The degenerates retreated to the wall, standing as still as candle shadows, listening without listening.

No one asked them to sit. No one said their names.

The meal continued. The house creaked, and beneath the table, the floor hummed faintly with the same hidden voices that had disturbed the night.

Later that evening, the air in the house shifted. Lamps were turned low. Doors were latched. Vera moved with quiet urgency, descending into the cellar with an armful of blankets and a bundle of dry branches tied with red string. The degenerates followed her down without sound, bare feet padding the stairs like ghosts obeying a ritual.

Vadim sat in the parlor, lighting a cigarette with trembling fingers. Aleksandr slouched on a worn armchair, his shirt half-unbuttoned, a bottle resting at his knee.

“It’s that time again,” he muttered. “The Feast of Branches. She lets them gather. Just once a year, she says.”

Vadim didn’t look up. “Superstition. She treats them like children playing with dolls and fire.”

From beneath the floorboards, the Visitor heard it begin—the low murmur of voices rising from the basement. At first indistinct, then sharper, as if shaped by urgency.

“Let me out of here... Let me out... Let me out...”

The Visitor turned his head toward the sound.

“They repeat it over and over,” Aleksandr said. “That’s their only prayer. Pathetic. They knock on the walls and beg to be released. But from what? The basement? The world?”

“Themselves,” Vadim added. “It’s a symptom of degenerative trauma. A reflex. No different than a dog whining at the door.”

“They believe in something,” the Visitor said.

Aleksandr snorted. “They believe the sea will split open and reveal the City of God. They believe the Mound will shine and burn and take them into heaven. They think he’s coming. The Intercessor. Some fool chosen to plead with God on their behalf. Madness.”

“And yet,” the Visitor said slowly, “they wait for him.”

“So what?” Aleksandr sat forward. “People wait for all kinds of nonsense. Wait for the rain to turn clean again. Wait for the sun to come back red. Wait for a second Eden. But nothing’s coming. Not for them. Not for us.”

Below, the voices had grown louder. Some were chanting now. Others wept. A single voice struck out from the murmur, shrill and fragile: “Let me out of the world.”

The room fell silent for a moment.

Aleksandr poured another drink. “It’s all theater. They cry, they crawl, they burn sticks and think it’ll bring a miracle. But the world’s done with miracles. No one’s listening.”

The Visitor rose from his chair and stepped toward the stairwell. The sound of the prayer was like water now, flowing and rising. He stood there a while, eyes closed.

“Or maybe,” he said, almost to himself, “someone is.”

Vadim stood abruptly. “Don’t get drawn into it. You’ve come here for a ruin. Not to kneel with beasts.”

The Visitor said nothing. His hand hovered over the stair rail, but he did not descend. Below, the chanting deepened, like roots growing in darkness, seeking the light of something they could not name.

The fire in the parlor had burned low, casting long orange bands across the faded rug. The Visitor remained standing, his gaze fixed on the dark stairwell. Vadim paced near the window, staring into the gloom beyond the glass, where the silhouettes of burnt trees bent like penitents. Aleksandr leaned back in his chair, glass in hand, his tone relaxed but sharp.

“They talk about the Mound as if it’s holy ground,” he said, “but there’s nothing there but dirt, broken stone, maybe the bones of old machines. They say the Museum is a city—a city under the sea, full of mystery and judgment. It’s not. It’s a ruin. And ruins don’t speak.”

The Visitor replied without looking at him. “But what if they do?”

Aleksandr laughed softly. “You’re starting to sound like one of them.”

Vadim stopped his pacing. “They repeat scraps of half-remembered scripture like birds mimicking thunder. ‘A path shall open from this age to the beginning of time.’ ‘The Intercessor shall be sent.’ Words. Nothing more.”

“But those same words,” the Visitor said, “are written in your own books.”

Vadim turned sharply. “And so what? Metaphor, myth, madness. We’ve moved past it.”

“Have we?” the Visitor asked. “Or did we just bury it under waste and call it progress?”

Vera, sitting quietly with her hands in her lap, glanced between them. “They aren’t wrong to hope,” she said softly.

Aleksandr shook his head. “Hope isn’t a virtue when it blinds you. You feed them ideas of salvation and they forget the world they live in. They stop listening to orders. They start shaking and speaking in riddles. You’ve seen it—when they start staring at the sky like it’ll split open.”

Vadim joined in. “We allow them their rites, their primitive religion. It keeps them pacified. But make no mistake—they’re degenerates, not prophets.”

The Visitor moved to the hearth, gazing into the coals. “The priests say the Mound will rise when the time comes. That it marks the place where the veil thins. That from it the Intercessor will speak.”

“From a pile of gravel?” Vadim scoffed.

“It’s not the soil that speaks,” the Visitor murmured. “It’s the silence beneath it.”

Aleksandr drank deeply. “You’ve been here two nights, and already you speak their madness.”

Vera looked down. “Maybe... maybe they’re only trying to remember something. Something we all forgot.”

“They remember stories,” Vadim replied. “And those stories will kill them. Like the tide kills those who follow the wrong signs.”

The Visitor turned. “And what have your signs brought? Ruins. Poisoned skies. A world sick with forgetting.”

No one answered at first. Then Aleksandr stood, swaying slightly. “Go with them, then. Burn your branches. Chant your prayers. See if the Mound hears you.”

Vera’s voice came soft, as though she feared it. “What if it does?”

The room fell still again, broken only by the weeping that still drifted up through the floor, slow and steady as breath in sleep.

In the morning, Vera approached the Visitor at breakfast with careful words and a faint crease in her brow.

“There’s a requirement,” she said, setting down a cracked plate. “You’ll need to register with the Inspection Office before heading toward the shore. It’s procedure. A formality, but... they take it seriously.”

“Where is it?”

“On the factory grounds, just past the reservation.”

He glanced toward the window where the sky shimmered pale and brittle above the rooftops. “Will someone take me?”

“Irina will guide you,” Vera said. “She knows the way. She doesn’t speak, but she listens.”

The girl stood waiting by the door. Barefoot, her dress faded to the color of ash, her hair tangled at the ends. She watched him with a gaze that was not empty, but distant—as if she lived on a shoreline he could not see.

They left the house in silence. The dust lay thick across the road, swallowing their footsteps. The town faded quickly behind them, swallowed by rusted fences and collapsed machines. The air grew heavier the farther they walked, as though each step drew them deeper into some unseen pit.

Past the hollowed-out water towers and the leaning storage tanks, the reservation came into view—ramshackle shelters of corrugated iron and canvas, arranged without order. Smoke curled from small fires. Shapes moved among them, slow and strange.

The degenerates.

They watched him with wary eyes—some blank, some fever-bright. Many wore symbols drawn in chalk across their chests, spirals and lines, crooked stars and eyes. They knelt or swayed or stood muttering with hands pressed to the ground.

A man rocked back and forth beside a burned-out barrel, whispering into his sleeve. A woman with an infant tied to her back held a charred branch high above her head, her face wet with tears and ash.

It was not madness, the Visitor thought. It was not ceremony either. It was something in between. Fear made holy. Grief made ritual.

Irina led him around the edge of the encampment, past a wall where a section of the old factory still stood. A small door was set into the concrete, stained dark with soot. She stopped and pointed.

“Is this the Inspection?”

She nodded once.

Before he entered, he looked back. A figure stood nearby, no more than a boy. His eyes were wide and glassy, his mouth moving in a slow rhythm. The Visitor crouched beside him.

“What are you saying?”

The boy blinked, then pressed a finger to his lips. He pointed to the wall and whispered, “Knock... knock and say the words.”

“What words?”

“Let me out of here.”

The Visitor stared at him.

“Say it many times,” the boy murmured, “until they answer.”

He stood and walked away, arms stretched as if balancing on an unseen beam. Irina watched without expression.

The Visitor turned toward the factory door. Inside, the form waited, along with the names and the warnings, but his thoughts lingered on the words he had just heard—words that felt too deep to belong to a child.

Knock. And say it.

Let me out of here.

The form was signed, the warnings spoken, the permission granted without ceremony. He was told he might drown, or lose his way, or go mad before the sea returned. “Your own risk,” the inspector had said. “No one’s fault but yours.” When he and Irina left the reservation, the air behind them still trembled with the rhythm of murmured prayer. The Visitor felt it follow him like a second heartbeat.

That night, the house seemed even smaller, as though the walls had drawn inward. The fires in the window bowls sputtered against the thick wind, casting the corridors in a dull red glow. Vera had retired early, Vadim’s laughter echoed once from his room and vanished, and Aleksandr’s heavy steps faded somewhere beyond the parlor.

The Visitor lay awake. The same voices rose from the basement—low, layered, sorrowful. He could make out the words now, spoken slowly, endlessly repeating. “Let me out of here… let me out of the world…”

He turned onto his side, pressing his palms to his ears, but the sound persisted, vibrating through the bedframe, through the air itself. It was not pleading anymore. It was calling.

A soft creak broke the rhythm. The door to his room opened a fraction. A thin line of light cut through the dark. Irina stepped inside. Barefoot, silent, her shadow trembled across the wall.

She closed the door behind her and stood still for a moment, as if listening to the house breathe. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper scraped raw from long silence.

“They said you came for the Museum.”

He sat up slowly. “I did.”

She moved closer, her eyes wide in the dim light. “They know you,” she said. “In the reservation. The priests spoke of you. They call you the Presaged One.”

He stared at her, uncertain whether to speak. “I’m no priest.”

“They said you would come before the sea swallowed the last city. They said you would climb the Mound and speak for us.”

“For you?”

“For everyone,” she breathed. “You will knock, and it will open. You will ask, and He will answer.”

Her words trembled. “They wait for you.”

The Visitor’s throat tightened. “You think I’m the one they speak of?”

Irina lowered her eyes. “I don’t know what I think. But when you walked through the camp, they stopped praying. For a moment, they listened. That has never happened before.”

The house groaned. Somewhere below, a voice broke into a high, weeping chant. “Let us out. Let us out…”

Irina stepped back toward the door. “Don’t be afraid,” she said softly. “If it’s you, the Mound will answer.”

When she was gone, the Visitor sat in darkness, his breath shallow, his thoughts circling like vultures above a carcass of doubt. The wind outside pressed against the walls as if it too sought release.

He did not sleep. The voices below continued their ceaseless refrain, rising and falling like the tide, until he could no longer tell whether they came from the basement or from within his own chest.

The Inspection

The Inspection Office was a room without time—walls the color of ash, a single fan stirring the warm air without success, a flickering bulb overhead that buzzed like a trapped insect. The floor was linoleum, buckled and peeling in places, stained with years of boot prints, dried salt, and forgotten ink.

The Visitor stood at the counter while a man in a gray smock flipped through a stack of brittle papers with fingers that moved more out of habit than purpose. His name tag was worn to nothing, and his eyes had the hollow, exhausted sheen of someone who had seen every version of hopelessness and had long since stopped caring.

“You’re here for the Museum,” the man said flatly, not looking up.

“Yes.”

He pulled out a thick form, dropped it with a thud on the desk, and handed the Visitor a rusted pen.

“Sign here. Name, origin, time of departure, estimated time of return. At the bottom, write: *I have been warned of possible dangers and agree not to hold the Inspection responsible for any harm, injury, loss of sanity, or death sustained during this expedition.*”

The Visitor stared at him. “That’s all?”

“That’s everything.” The man leaned back in his chair, the wooden frame creaking. “No guides, no maps, no rescue if you’re late. The tide won’t wait for you. If it comes in and you’re out there...” He made a vague gesture with his hand, mimicking a wave washing over something small and breakable.

The Visitor signed.

The inspector nodded toward the sea visible through a cracked window. “We’ve had seven go out this season. Two never came back. One returned blind. Not physically. Just... blind.”

“And the rest?”

“They came back with stories. Wrote things down. Most of them stopped speaking after a while.”

The Visitor said nothing.

The man laughed, but without humor. “I don’t understand you people. Risk your life to see ruins? A flooded museum filled with broken statues and corroded names? What do you expect to find there?”

The Visitor replied quietly, “Whatever’s left.”

“That’s the problem,” the man said, rising to stamp the permit with a cracked seal. “There’s nothing left. Just ghosts, salt, and sorrow. If you drown, we are not responsible.”

He handed him the paper.

“You can go.”

The Visitor tucked the permit into his coat.

“Seven days,” the inspector added. “No more. When the sea returns, it returns fast. You hear the water before you see it. Some don’t run in time. Some don’t want to.”

He sat back down and picked up his pen, already forgetting the man who stood before him.

Outside, the wind had shifted. The sky had begun to pale, and somewhere far off, gulls circled something that could not be seen.

When the Visitor returned from the Reservation, the air had grown heavier, swollen with a damp stillness that pressed on the lungs. The house sat as it always had—quiet, sagging, almost patient—but something in its silence had changed. He stepped through the door and heard voices from the next room, low and urgent, their edges sharpened by unease. He hesitated in the hallway, unseen.

Vera spoke first. Her tone was soft but trembled with worry. “He’s different. He doesn’t sleep. He listens to them at night. I hear him walking the halls.”

Aleksandr's voice came next, slurred by drink and contempt. "He talks to the servants. To that mute girl. He asks about the Feast, about the Mound. He's one of them. A runaway from the Reservation."

"Don't be absurd," Vera said quickly. "He's educated. He speaks clearly. He reads."

Vadim interrupted, sharper. "So do some of them, after they escape. You know that. The Inspection's been warning us for months—degenerates mixing in, passing for normal. They shave, they learn a few words, they come here pretending to be travelers."

Aleksandr laughed harshly. "And what for? To pray under our roof? To infect us with their madness?"

"To convert us," Vadim answered. "To drag us into their cult."

Vera tried to speak but her voice faltered. "He's not—he can't be—"

"He believes in the Mound," Vadim snapped. "I heard him last night. He told Irina that the priests might be right, that he could feel something calling him. What normal man says that?"

Silence followed, broken only by the faint rattle of a windowpane.

Aleksandr lowered his voice, almost a whisper. "We should report him to the Inspection. Before the Feast. Before the others start coming around asking questions. You've seen what happens when the degenerates think a prophet's arrived."

Vera's reply was barely audible. "You'd have them take him away?"

"I'd rather that than wake one night to find him preaching in the yard," Aleksandr said. "You saw the eyes of that mute girl. They follow him like he's holy."

Vadim's voice came again, cold and steady. "He's not holy. He's dangerous."

The Visitor stood still, his breath shallow. Through the half-open door he could see the edge of the dining table, the dull shine of Vera's hands gripping its surface. For a moment, he thought to step inside, to confront them, to demand their honesty—but then the words came again from the floorboards below.

A faint moan. A whisper.

"Let me out of here…"

The voices of the degenerates, as though answering his thoughts.

He turned away from the doorway, walked quietly up the stairs, and closed himself in his room. The wind pressed against the house like an unseen ear. Fear had come to live among them, and it spoke with many voices.

The Visitor did not descend for dinner. He sat in his room as dusk bled into the corners of the walls, the pale light from the window bending through soot-streaked glass. The wind had died completely. The house no longer breathed.

On the small table beside the bed lay the worn book—the same the degenerates used in their rites. It had been left on his pillow, though no one admitted to placing it there. The cover was cracked, the binding loose, its pages lined with marginal notes in many hands—some careful, others childlike, some barely legible. Crossed-out words, symbols, fragments of scripture blurred by time and tears.

He opened it.

The pages whispered as they turned, like dry leaves disturbed by an unseen hand. His finger stopped on a verse, underlined twice in red ink.

“What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

He read it again. Then aloud, though his voice sounded hollow in the room.

“And the son of man, that thou visitest him?”

The words rang through the silence like a bell struck in a ruined chapel.

He sat still. In the walls, the faint sound began again. A scratching—no, a shifting. As if the very bones of the house stirred to listen.

He leaned close to the wall, ear pressed against the cold plaster. A whisper met him, indistinct and circling.

“Presaged One... Intercessor... sorrow... Mound...”

He closed his eyes. Faces passed behind them—Irina’s, the boy from the reservation, the kneeling woman with ash on her forehead, the priests he had not yet seen but somehow knew.

He turned to another page at random. A new line revealed itself:

“Let him become a fool, that he may be wise.”

He read more. The voices outside the text began to blend with the ones within. He saw the Mound in his mind, not as stone or hill, but as something living—a wound in the earth, pulsing with waiting.

He turned another page. This one bore no verse, only a scrawled note:

"He shall be deaf and blind like all abiding in the final days. But he shall sense the wings of his angel, for the name of his Angel is Sorrow."

He stared at the words until they blurred.

The house creaked—slowly, deliberately. A knock, soft as breath, echoed through the wall. Once. Then again.

He did not respond.

But his hand stayed on the page, and his eyes did not look away.

He left the house before dawn, wrapped in silence and his long coat, the book hidden beneath his arm. The streets of the settlement were empty, painted with the pale gray of coming light. Even the wind seemed afraid to rise.

He crossed the scorched field east of the town and followed the dried-out ditch that wound toward the edge of the Reservation. A low wall of cracked stone marked the boundary—ancient, crumbling, spotted with lichen and soot. On the far side, shrouded figures moved like shadows in the fog.

They did not speak when he approached. They only watched, motionless, wrapped in robes the color of ash and dried blood. Faces were hidden beneath frayed hoods. Their silence was not absence, but density—like the weight of a storm before the first drop falls.

The Visitor stopped a few paces from the wall. He held the book in his hand.

One of the figures raised a gnarled arm and beckoned him forward.

“You’ve come,” the voice rasped, neither surprised nor welcoming. “The Presaged One walks.”

“I don’t know what I am,” the Visitor replied.

Another voice emerged from the shadows, layered and low. “He shall not know his mystery... until the Mound answers.”

The first figure stepped closer. “You bear the book. You hear the knocking in the walls. You walk in silence. That is the first sign.”

“What is it they expect of me?” the Visitor asked. “I’ve heard the prayers, the chants. They speak of salvation. But what can I give them?”

A third voice now, brittle and bright: “You are the Intercessor. Chosen not to command, but to be broken. The path is not to lead, but to bear.”

He looked from hood to hood, searching for a face, a flicker of doubt, but there was only darkness.

“They speak of the Mound,” he said. “Of the Museum. Of voices.”

A fourth priest whispered, barely audible: “All shall pass beneath the Museum’s ruin. All shall stand upon the Mound. All shall be silent. And only one shall knock.”

He stepped back, shaken. “I’m not a prophet.”

The first priest raised both hands slowly. “And yet here you are. The Book found you. The words found you. And in the deep, your Angel waits.”

A pause. Then together, in soft unison, the cloaked figures intoned:

“An Intercessor shall be sent.
He shall not know his mystery.
He shall speak to the silence.
His Angel is Sorrow.”

The Visitor stood frozen. Behind him, the fog thinned over the reservation, revealing dozens of forms watching from a distance—kneeling, hands clasped, their eyes bright with yearning.

He turned and walked away without another word. The chant followed him like a shadow, fading with each step but never fully vanishing.

When the Visitor returned, the sun was already low, bruising the horizon with red and ocher light. Dust clung to him like a veil, and the smell of smoke followed him through the threshold. His steps were slower now, deliberate, as though each one carried weight from another world.

The house was quiet, yet the silence within it had changed. Vera stood at the kitchen door, her hands folded in front of her apron, her eyes uncertain. Vadim was nowhere to be seen. Aleksandr’s voice drifted faintly from another room, half-drunk, muttering about permits and trespassers.

She spoke first, softly. “You were gone all day.”

He nodded. “I went to the Reservation.”

Her breath caught. “Why?”

“They called me.”

Vera looked down, shaking her head. “You shouldn’t listen to them. They twist words, they twist minds. Even the inspectors say—”

“They said I am the Intercessor,” he interrupted, his tone calm, almost tender. “That the Angel of Sorrow walks with me. That the Mound waits.”

She took a slow step toward him, her face pale. “You don’t believe that.”

He did not answer immediately. His eyes wandered to the window, where the last light of day bled across the yard. “At first, I didn’t. But I heard the words before they spoke them. I saw the Mound before they named it. It’s written in me somehow. In my bones.”

Vera touched his arm, voice trembling. “Please. Don’t say that where my brother can hear. He’ll tell the Office. He already thinks you’re one of them.”

He turned to her, his expression serene, almost gentle. “Maybe I am.”

“No,” she said quickly. “You’re not like them. You think, you understand, you—” She stopped, searching his eyes for something that would reassure her, but what she found instead was distance. “Don’t go to the sea. Not now. Wait. At least wait until after the Feast.”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t have to prove anything. Whatever you think is waiting for you—it isn’t salvation.”

He smiled faintly. “No. It’s truth.”

“Truth?” she whispered. “There’s nothing left to find out there.”

“Then let me see the nothing with my own eyes.”

Her grip on his arm tightened, desperate now. “They said the same before they drowned. Every one of them. They saw visions, they spoke of angels, and the tide took them.”

The Visitor looked past her, to the stairwell that led down to the cellar. From below came the faint hum of voices again—soft, rhythmic, pleading.

“I must go,” he said quietly. “Before the tide turns.”

Vera’s hand fell away.

He walked toward the door, and for a moment she thought to call him back. But she did not. She watched as he stepped into the red light of the dying sun, his figure soon swallowed by dust and shadow, moving toward the unseen shore where faith and ruin met.

The Path to the Sea

The Visitor rose before dawn, gathered his coat, the book, and the small parcel of food Vera had left outside his door. No one saw him descend the stairs. No one spoke as he crossed the threshold into the thick silence of the morning. The door creaked once behind him, then closed like the last word in a forgotten prayer.

Vera stood behind the curtain, watching him through the film of dust-streaked glass. Her mouth moved, but no words came. She had said all she could. Vadim and Aleksandr remained upstairs—whether out of scorn, fear, or silent agreement, she did not know.

Outside, the world had shifted.

The sky was iron-colored, heavy and low, smeared with bruises of violet and ochre. The wind had picked up, pushing across the flats in sharp gusts that carried with them the scent of salt and something stranger—like old stone broken open. Off in the distance, clouds gathered in great coils. A storm approached, slow and massive, as though drawn by prophecy.

Beyond the edge of town, on the fields near the reservation, the Feast of Branches had begun.

The degenerates gathered in hundreds, their bodies marked with chalk, ash, and paint. Children carried bundles of dried branches tied with red cloth, setting them into circles and lighting them with coals carried from long-tended fires. The flames were small but burned fiercely, casting the wild shadows of bent backs and raised arms across the cracked earth.

They chanted—at first softly, then rising in waves. No words at first, only sound, like a throat remembering how to weep and rejoice at once. Then phrases emerged.

“Let me out of here…”

“Open the gate…”

“Send the Intercessor…”

The Visitor did not speak. He walked slowly past them, and as he did, they parted—not from fear, not from command, but as if moved by an invisible wind that flowed from him. Some reached toward him, others fell to their knees. The chants followed his steps.

He passed the place where Irina stood among the others, her eyes wide and unblinking, a small flame in her palm. She did not cry out. She only bowed her head as he passed.

Farther still, beyond the outer fires, the air changed.

The wind dropped suddenly.

He crested the last ridge before the coast.

And there it was.

The sea, vast and ancient, had begun to retreat. The tide, held back by some unseen force, had drawn away from the land like a breath withheld. What remained was a plain of wet sand and broken stone, streaked with salt and black silt. Jagged metal glinted in the dim light. Fragments of bone and shattered glass lay half-buried.

The seabed was opening.

And in the distance, at the edge of vision, something dark and sunken rose faintly above the mist—the silhouette of the Museum, still drowned in silence, waiting.

The Visitor did not hesitate.

He stepped forward, and the ground beneath him gave a soft sigh, as though the world itself recognized his path.

The dump train waited at the edge of the factory line, its rusted cars groaning under the weight of their cargo—scrap metal, broken machines, and sealed drums that hissed softly when the wind shifted. The locomotive bled smoke into the sky like a wounded beast, its whistle long broken, replaced by a low mechanical hum.

The Visitor climbed aboard without a word, taking a seat on a crate near the rear. The floor was slick with oil and old water. Around him sat the others—laborers, scavengers, scavengers' children—faces worn and sharp, eyes too tired to hope. They stared at him at first, then muttered among themselves.

“Another one headed for the sea,” someone said, laughing under their breath.

A man with a long face and a chemical-stained coat leaned toward him. “You looking for treasure out there? Maybe a shrine? Maybe your own grave?”

The others chuckled.

“People go out there thinking they’ll find something,” the man continued, peeling a strip of meat from a piece of jerky. “You know what’s at the end of the dump? Nothing. Poison and ghosts. You’ll get there, sure. But something will get inside your head and twist it.”

A boy beside him nodded. “My uncle went. Said he saw the cities beneath the sea speaking to each other. Came back with no tongue.”

“Came back?” the man scoffed. “He didn’t come back. That wasn’t your uncle. That was something else.”

The Visitor said nothing.

The train lurched forward. The cars screamed on the rails, metal grinding against metal as the wasteland opened around them. The town shrank into the distance, reduced to shadow and smoke.

Beyond the windows, heaps of broken things stretched like graves—televisions melted into concrete, eyeless dolls half-buried in tar, engines corroded into shapes that no longer made sense.

The sky darkened.

“You know,” the man said, now almost kindly, “it’s not wrong to turn back. Even the degenerates wait for someone else to go first. Let the holy man walk. Let the tide teach him humility.”

The Visitor looked at the land ahead. It shimmered, vast and broken. The sea’s memory lingered in every crack.

“I’m not looking for treasure,” he said quietly.

“Oh? Then what?”

“I’m looking for a door.”

They laughed again, but softer now, as though some part of them didn’t want to mock too loudly.

The train pressed forward. The land grew stranger. The road behind them vanished. Only the path ahead remained—salt, shadow, and a silence that deepened with every passing mile.

The train left him at the end of the line, where the tracks were swallowed by silt and twisted metal, and the last outpost stood like a sentinel too tired to give warning. Its windows were empty, doors collapsed inward, signs faded to white scars. Beyond it, the world opened—wide, wet, silent.

He stepped off the platform, boots sinking slightly into the exposed sea floor. The tide had fled completely now, leaving behind a landscape scarred by ages of drowning. Cracked mud stretched in all directions, veined like old skin, glistening with salt and the memory of waves. The air was still, heavy, and dense with the smell of brine and decay.

He walked.

Rusted hulls of forgotten ships jutted from the sand like the bones of leviathans. Shards of porcelain and twisted utensils littered the path. Tires, barbed wire, shattered altarpieces. The wreckage of two centuries lay scattered in his footsteps.

There were bones too.

Some white and long, washed clean by salt. Others small and tangled in remnants of cloth. He did not stop to study them. He kept walking.

The wind began to rise, faint and cold. The sky above was choked with darkening clouds that roiled without movement. And yet, in the heart of it, the Visitor felt a stillness growing inside him—an absence of fear, a clarity that sharpened with every step.

He drew the book from his coat and opened it, the pages stiff from the sea air. He read aloud as he walked, his voice steady and low.

“From the desolation of the earth I beseech thee, O Savior…”

The wind carried the words outward, as if the seabed itself might listen.

“Make of my sorrow a ladder,
Of my silence a song.
Open the gate of your ruined house.
Let the last man speak once more.”

He paused at the edge of a sunken trench, filled with dark water that did not move. A mirror of the sky, or something deeper. He stepped around it carefully.

Ahead, the Museum loomed—still distant, but clearer now. A jagged silhouette rising from the plain, half-buried, its spires broken, its domes caved in. The remnants of once-sacred halls now blackened and hollow.

He closed the book.

His lips continued to move.

“Though the mountains fall into the sea,
And the earth be stripped bare,
Yet will I knock upon the door.
Yet will I ask.”

His voice grew hoarse, but he did not stop.

Around him, the bones whispered.

Beneath him, the mud sighed.

Above, the storm watched in silence.

Night descended like a slow tide, devouring the horizon in a deep gray hush. The wind had ceased altogether, leaving only the distant groan of the sea shifting somewhere beyond sight. The Visitor’s footsteps grew uneven, the ground beneath him slick with salt and unseen rivulets of black water. The air thickened; the world seemed to breathe against him, vast and indifferent.

His voice faltered, then returned in broken fragments of prayer.

“Lord… from the ends of the earth I cry to thee…”

The sound went nowhere. It vanished into the emptiness, absorbed by the ancient silence of the sea floor. The darkness pressed closer, dissolving distance, erasing the path he had followed. Even the stars, blurred by low clouds, offered no witness.

He walked until his legs trembled. Then he fell to his knees. The cracked mud accepted him without resistance. The book slipped from his hand and opened face-down in the wet clay. He tried to lift his head, but exhaustion—heavy, sacred, complete—pulled him downward.

He whispered once more, “Hear me… before I am lost…”

Then he collapsed fully, his body sinking slightly into the cold earth.

The world went black.

And then—light.

He opened his eyes, but whether in dream or delirium he could not tell. Around him stretched a city beneath water, radiant and terrible. Streets of glass spiraled downward, illuminated by a dim, trembling glow that came not from sun or fire but from the walls themselves. Buildings stood upside down, their spires pointing toward the deep. Windows opened onto nothingness. Bells swung soundlessly, tolling beneath the weight of forgotten prayers.

Fish, pale and translucent, drifted through doorways. Statues turned in slow circles, their eyes full of tears that did not fall.

He saw cathedrals inverted, their domes blooming downward into the abyss like the roots of great trees. Inside them, fires burned blue, and within those fires stood figures—men and women without faces, holding out their hands toward him.

Above it all, at the farthest edge of sight, rose the Mound.

Not a hill, but a pillar of living light. It pulsed as if alive, its surface shifting like flesh and stone entwined. Voices whispered from within it—millions of them, all repeating the same phrase, soft as the sound of rain.

“Come up. Come up. The Intercessor must come up.”

He stumbled toward it, his limbs weightless, his chest filled with light and dread. The ground beneath him rippled like water.

As he reached out, the Mound opened—just slightly—and he saw within it a shape, burning and human, weeping and radiant.

His own face.

The vision shattered.

He awoke gasping in the mud, his body trembling with cold. The wind had returned, howling low across the flats. The Museum stood closer now, its broken silhouette cutting against a storm-lit sky.

The Visitor rose slowly to his feet, every joint stiff, every breath a prayer.

He picked up the book, wiped the salt from its cover, and continued walking toward the ruin that waited.

By the time he reached the Museum, the sky had grown heavy with bruised clouds, trembling with the promise of rain. Lightning flickered far off, illuminating the ruin in brief, breathless flashes—a cathedral broken by time, its edges gnawed by salt, its walls sagging inward like a house that remembered too much sorrow.

The ground squelched beneath his boots. Algae clung to the columns. The outer façade bore no signs, no names, only the faint reliefs of forgotten epics, their figures blurred and worn away by centuries of tide. Shells lined the steps. Crabs scuttled into the shadows.

The door was gone—ripped away or simply dissolved. Inside, the chamber yawned with stillness. He stepped into a hallway lined with broken statues, their faces cracked, some headless, others turned inward in poses of shame or contemplation. The walls wept brine. The ceiling had collapsed in places, revealing a gray sky that dripped into black pools on the floor.

There were no visitors.

No relics.

No light.

And yet, he felt watched.

He moved deeper, past a chamber where murals had once been painted—now nothing but streaks of pigment lost to the years. Beyond it, the ground began to rise, slightly, as if the earth itself held its breath.

And then, he saw it.

The Mound.

It stood at the center of a domed gallery, cracked open at the top like a wound in the sky. Rain had begun to fall now—slow, deliberate drops that echoed against stone. The Mound rose not with grandeur, but with gravity. It was no monument. It was a scar.

Rough-hewn, blackened by salt, it pulsed faintly beneath the rain. Small flames flickered at its base—dry branches, arranged in careful circles, smoldering with reverence. The scent of ash and sea filled the air.

The Visitor approached, each step slower than the last. His limbs ached with the weight of the journey, his breath thin and broken.

When he reached the foot of the Mound, he collapsed to his knees.

The stone was cold beneath him. The world swayed, thunder rumbling beyond the ruin.

His hands reached out and touched the slime-covered stone.

His voice came low, barely audible, yet the space around him seemed to draw it in.

“Lord… it is I, man.”

He bowed his head.

The rain fell harder now, mixing with the salt on his skin. The Mound did not speak. It did not move. And yet something in it stirred, deep and hidden.

He pressed his forehead to the stone, eyes closed.

“Let me out of here,” he whispered.

And the sea, distant yet rising, began to answer.

The Intercessor

The chamber grew darker as the sky sealed itself overhead. The open dome above the Mound framed a circle of storm clouds spinning slowly, a vast eye watching without mercy. The

Visitor knelt motionless, water streaming down his face, his body bowed but unbroken. The salt in his mouth mingled with blood from cracked lips.

Then the rupture began.

It was not pain, not precisely. It was too vast for that. It was the splitting of silence.

A sound filled the ruin—not from without, but from within. A choir of voices, layered and circling, old as stone, young as breath, speaking all at once in a tongue half-remembered and wholly understood.

“He shall not know his mystery…”

The walls trembled. The Mound flickered with dim inner light, like embers deep within wet ash.

“He shall carry the burden of the last man…”

The Visitor gasped. His vision blurred. He clutched the stone before him to keep from falling backward. The Mound pulsed beneath his palms, and the sound became unbearable—a hundred thousand whispers, a storm of memory.

“His sorrow shall be his only gift…”

He saw flashes behind his eyes:

A child scraping prayers into a wall with broken fingernails.
A man digging through poisoned soil, planting nothing but hope.
A woman walking into the sea with a branch clutched in her hand.

He saw the inverted cathedrals again, glowing from within, their foundations made of bones and grief. He saw himself—alone, always alone—kneeling in ruins across centuries, a figure unchanged, returning again and again to a question that had no answer.

The chamber echoed now with a steady chant, low and endless:

“He shall speak not to command, but to remember…”
“He shall open the door, though it leads only to sorrow…”
“He shall not rise, but fall, and in falling, lift others…”

The Visitor’s body shuddered. The floor beneath him rippled like breath. His mouth opened, and though he did not choose the words, they poured from him:

“I do not know my name. I do not know my purpose. But I am here.”

The light inside the Mound flared, then dimmed. The voices fell silent.

And for a moment, there was only the sound of rain falling into ash.

The air within the ruin hung heavy with moisture and silence, as if the storm outside had drawn in its breath to listen. The Visitor rose unsteadily from the foot of the Mound, his limbs trembling as if they had borne the weight of generations. The light from within the stone had dimmed, but its heat still lingered in the air, subtle and suffocating.

He wandered deeper into the Museum's broken halls, each step echoing through the wet stone. Corridors sloped at strange angles, warped by time and pressure. Pools of black water collected in every hollow. He passed columns that had once borne the weight of knowledge now too heavy to hold. Salt crusted every surface. Fungi bloomed in corners like pale hands reaching up from the earth.

Then he entered the central gallery.

It was vast, circular, with a ceiling that had partially collapsed, revealing a glimpse of the darkening sky. Around the walls stood statues—dozens of them—each locked in an agony beyond words. Twisted faces, mouths open in silent screams. Hands clutching hearts, heads bowed as if in shame. They had not been carved in triumph, nor in reverence, but in mourning.

One statue knelt alone in a shallow alcove, its body curled inward, arms wrapped around itself, as if it had turned to stone in the midst of weeping. The Visitor touched it gently, and the salt flaked away like old skin.

At the far end of the gallery, above a raised platform, a fresco remained partially intact. Time had spared it just enough to see what it once had meant.

It showed a man standing alone on a hill.

All around him, fire devoured the land—cities burning, seas boiling, skies cracked open like wounded skin. And at the center, the man raised no weapon, no book, no hand. He stood bare, watching the flames, eyes lifted not in defiance, but in sorrow.

Behind him, in the distance, was the faint shape of the Mound. Before him, a mass of figures bowed low in ash and flame.

The Visitor stared.

The face was not clear. The fresco had decayed in parts, lines blurred, paint worn to dust. But there was no need for clarity. He recognized the posture. He recognized the sorrow.

He saw himself.

He stepped back, breath caught in his throat. The chamber seemed to shudder around him, as though the stones were remembering.

"I was always meant to find this," he whispered.

Above him, the fresco's sky had been painted in black and gold—the color of endings and beginnings. In the fire, in the silence, in the grief carved into every corner, there was no redemption.

Only remembrance.

And the weight of bearing witness.

He fell to his knees before the fresco, his breath coming in shuddering gasps. The painted flames seemed to waver in the half-light, flickering across the walls like the reflection of a fire still burning somewhere far below the sea. His tears mingled with the saltwater that dripped from the cracks above, tracing the lines of dust on his face until grief and the ruin became one.

He pressed his forehead to the cold stone floor.

"Why?" he whispered. His voice echoed faintly, swallowed by the enormity of the silence. "Why must the chosen ones suffer? Why is sorrow the price of sight?"

The echo returned his words, bending them, mocking them: *suffer... sight... sight...*

His hands gripped the edges of the cracked tiles until his knuckles bled.

"Let them out of the world," he pleaded. "Let them die in peace. Let the children stop crying in the dark. Let the mad be silent. Let them go where there is no dust, no hunger, no waiting. Everything here is a lie."

His voice broke. "Everything."

The sound carried through the gallery, climbing the walls like wind in a hollow cave. The statues seemed to turn toward him, faces straining under the invisible weight of his words.

The ground shuddered once.

A low vibration rolled through the foundation, subtle at first, then growing—a deep, resonant hum rising from beneath the Mound. The puddles at his feet quivered. Dust fell in small spirals from the ceiling. The cracked fresco trembled, and from its painted sky, a thin vein of light split through the black pigment.

He lifted his head.

The tremor deepened, shaking loose fragments of plaster and stone. A rumble rolled through the entire ruin, long and distant, like thunder speaking in a language older than the earth.

The Visitor's heart pounded. He thought the Museum might collapse, but it did not. It only quaked as if waking from a long and terrible dream.

He whispered again, through clenched teeth and tears, "Hear me."

And somewhere within the Mound, buried deep below, something heard.

The trembling subsided slowly, fading into a silence so vast it seemed to stretch beyond time. Dust hung in the air like pale smoke. The Visitor rose unsteadily, his limbs shaking, his breath ragged. The mural above him had cracked down the center, splitting the image of the burning world in two. Through the fissure, faint light seeped in—a cold, gray glow that felt neither of dawn nor of mercy.

He turned toward the doorway. The path back through the ruined corridors felt different now—every echo longer, every shadow watching. The Museum's walls wept openly, streams of brine running down the carved faces of its saints. The floor was damp beneath his feet, and with each step the water deepened slightly.

When he emerged into the open, the sky had darkened again. The horizon, once dry and distant, now shimmered with a rising, restless gleam. The tide was returning.

He stood there in the open, at the foot of the Mound, his clothes soaked with salt and his face streaked with ash and tears. The first waves reached the base of the ruin, curling around the stones with a slow and patient hunger.

He raised his arms to the heavens, his voice breaking against the roar of the wind.

"Lord! Let me live!"

The cry tore from him like something ancient and human, rising against the storm.

"Let me live—not for myself, but for them! For those who wait in the dark! For those who cannot speak! For those who have forgotten your name!"

But the wind only howled in reply, carrying his words out to sea.

The water climbed higher, swirling around his knees, the cold biting deep into his flesh. He did not move. He could not. He remained kneeling before the Mound, his eyes fixed on the sky as lightning veined the clouds.

"Lord…" he whispered once more, his voice almost gone, "it is I, man."

The waves broke against him, foam white as bone, rising inch by inch. Behind him, the Museum began to vanish beneath the tide, swallowed in slow degrees. The wind tore at his coat and hair, but still he knelt, unmoving, his hands clasped, his body trembling under the weight of the returning sea.

And the storm, vast and indifferent, took him into its embrace.

The wind shifted once more, carrying with it a distant sound—not thunder, not the crashing of waves, but human voices, rising and falling in solemn cadence. A chant, slow and sorrowful, barely audible over the roar of the returning sea.

The Visitor turned his head, saltwater stinging his eyes.

Far beyond the flooded flats, beyond the broken trail that led back to land, they stood—a vast congregation of degenerates gathered along the shoreline, black against the horizon. They did not move. They made no attempt to cross the rising water. They only stood, side by side, heads bowed, arms raised, mouths open in praise or mourning.

Their voices reached him across the expanse:

"Let him go…
Let him rise…
Let the sea carry the sorrow…"

Their chant was steady, unwavering, not in panic or triumph, but in witness. They had come not to save him. Not to call him back. But to see. To remember.

The Visitor, waist-deep in water now, lifted his face toward the storm. Rain lashed his skin, but he did not flinch. A faint smile broke across his lips—thin, exhausted, almost peaceful. It was the expression of one who had found the question, even if not the answer.

He looked once more toward the choir of the forgotten, and nodded.

Then the tide rose over his shoulders. His knees finally gave way. The water swallowed him in a single slow wave.

For a moment, only his hand remained, fingers stretched toward the sky, trembling.

Then it too was gone.

And the sea, endless and old, closed itself as if it had never opened.

The chanting faded.

The wind settled.

On the shore, the degenerates turned slowly away, their faces unreadable, their silence deeper than grief.

The Mound vanished beneath the water.

Only the memory of the Intercessor remained—carried not in books or statues, but in the breath of those who waited.

The Museum Below

He is gone.

So begins the letter, written in careful strokes upon yellowing paper, Vera's handwriting unsteady but composed. Ink smudged once in the corner, where perhaps her hand trembled. Or perhaps she wept.

Some say he drowned. Others… that he ascended. I do not know which to believe, and I am ashamed to say I never asked him why he came. Not truly. I feared his answers even more than his silence.

The page is dated three days after the tide's return. The storm has passed. The settlement remains half-buried in windblown ash and salted mud. The Feast of Branches ended in silence. The degenerates do not speak of it aloud, but their eyes gleam with a reverence Vera has never seen before.

There are rumors, of course, she writes. *Aleksandr insists he was delusional, that he walked into the tide with madness in his heart. Vadim, ever suspicious, says he was a plant from the Reservation, sent to incite disorder. But neither speaks with certainty anymore. Not since the floodwaters rose and left no body behind.*

The house is quieter now. Irina has vanished—gone the morning after the storm, leaving only a torn page from the sacred book on the kitchen table. No one saw her leave. No one tried to stop her.

I find myself drawn to his room, Vera continues. *Not to search it, but to sit. To listen. There are no voices in the walls now, but sometimes, when the wind slips through the shutters, I think I hear him say those words again…*

She does not write them. Perhaps she cannot.

I cannot explain what he was to us. A guest. A stranger. A prophet? No. That word frightens me. But he was something… else. And though I am not devout, I find myself lighting a branch each evening, and placing it in the window.

The ink trails downward, paused, then resumes:

Perhaps he did drown. Perhaps the tide closed over him as it does over all things. But something in me believes—

She crosses the line out.

Then writes again, slowly:

—believes that the Museum was not a place, but a question. And that he was the answer it called home.

She signs her name only with a letter: *V.*

Folds the page.

And places it beside the window, where the rain has begun to fall once more.

Night returns, thick with mist and the hush of unspoken memory. Along the edge of the Reservation, near the crumbling wall where once they waited in ash and silence, the

degenerates gather once more. No bells are rung. No drums are struck. There is no music, no feasting, no cries of triumph.

Only fire.

One by one, they light branches, brittle and twisted, bound with red cloth. The flames are small, flickering like breath in the windless air. They form a ring, each flame spaced as if marking the place of a name not spoken aloud. The people stand motionless, the glow of the fire painting their faces in ochre and sorrow.

The priest steps forward—his robes damp with mist, his voice rasped from chanting through too many seasons. He carries the sacred book bound in rotting twine, its pages softened by sea air and prayer.

He raises it above his head, but does not open it.

Instead, he speaks.

“The Presaged One has walked the path.”

No cheers follow. No weeping. No outcry of belief or disbelief.

Only stillness.

“He walked into the sea, bearing no crown, no command, no salvation. He went alone, because it was written that the Intercessor must be alone.”

The flames hiss softly, embers rising like stars.

“He carried our sorrow to the gate. And he did not return. This is the sign.”

A young girl kneels, her hands trembling, her branch burning low in the dust. Beside her, an old man stares into the fire as if waiting for something within it to speak.

The priest lowers the book.

“The tide has returned. But the Mound is gone. Only the memory remains. And it is enough.”

The circle remains unbroken.

The flames flicker, casting shadows against the broken wall behind them—shadows of bent backs and uplifted hands, a people not saved, not healed, but witnessed.

Their chant begins, quiet as breath:

“Let him be remembered.
Let him be the flame in the flood.
Let sorrow be our prayer.”

And the wind, carrying no answer, moves softly through the ring of fire.

The house had not changed, but everything within it felt displaced, as if the walls no longer remembered how to hold silence. Rain tapped faintly at the windows, and somewhere in the chimney, wind keened like a child caught between sleep and waking.

Vadim paced the length of the parlor, his boots muddy, his cigarette burning low between clenched fingers.

“They’ve already sent a report,” he muttered. “The Inspection Office wants full statements. They think we housed a fugitive. A zealot. A lunatic. And now they’re sniffing around like we buried him ourselves.”

He stopped, exhaling smoke in short, bitter bursts.

“They’ll call it suicide. A ‘ritual drowning.’ And then they’ll start measuring our words, auditing our records. You think they care about the truth? They care about the story. And the story is madness.”

Vera sat near the window, hands folded, eyes far away. She did not answer.

Vadim turned to her sharply. “Say something. You saw the way he walked into the sea. That wasn’t a man seeking truth. That was a man broken.”

Still she said nothing.

He scoffed and threw the cigarette into the fireplace. “I warned you from the beginning. But no one listened. Now they’ll be knocking on our door every week. Watching. Waiting for us to say the wrong thing.”

At that moment, Irina appeared in the hallway, barefoot, her dress damp with the fog. She carried a broom and cloth, moving silently toward the stairs. She had not spoken since the Visitor’s departure.

Vadim glanced at her. “And what about the mute? She followed him like a shadow. What’s she hiding, huh? Maybe the inspectors should ask her what he said in those last days.”

Irina didn’t look at him.

She slipped upstairs.

Vadim swore under his breath and stormed out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind him.

Upstairs, in the quiet of the Visitor’s room, Irina knelt beside the bed. The sheets had been left untouched since the morning he walked away. On the nightstand lay a dry branch, cracked but unburned.

She opened the drawer. Inside was nothing but a sliver of torn parchment—the corner of a page, soaked once with water, now stiff and faded. Carefully, she reached in and took it.

The writing was barely visible, but she knew it by heart. She had seen it once in the Book, whispered by the priests:

"And the one who kneels at the threshold shall speak not with words, but with sorrow, and the Mound shall open."

She folded the page once, twice, and tucked it under her blouse, against her heart.

Then she returned to her cleaning, her face expressionless, her silence deeper than the room itself.

The sea returned in full, swallowing the land with a slow, inevitable breath. The Museum, once revealed in the brief window of retreat, vanished again beneath the tide. Waves rolled over its shattered dome, filling the halls, smothering the relics, drowning the last air from its ruin. Salt reclaimed every stone. The Mound, once pulsing at its center, disappeared without trace—no flame, no light, not even a ripple to mark its passing.

And yet, something lingered.

In the Reservation, where ash still clung to doorways and broken altars, the degenerates walked with changed eyes. They no longer cried out during the night. The prayers they once howled now came in whispers, soft and secret, passed from mouth to ear with careful reverence.

The children began to draw again—figures kneeling beneath a storm, circles of fire, a man with no face but eyes full of water. One boy carved the outline of a hand into the wood of a prayer post, five fingers outstretched, pressed upward, as if reaching toward the sky through the weight of the sea.

The priests no longer spoke in riddles. They watched instead. They listened. When asked about the Intercessor, they lowered their heads, not in denial, but in awe.

"He was not the one we expected," one whispered, hunched before a smoldering branch. "He bore no crown. He spoke no command. But he entered the water. And the Mound vanished."

Another replied, "The stone received him. It does not forget."

Among the degenerates, no one used his name—not because it was lost, but because it had become more than singular. He had become a presence, an echo in the mind, a shape that flickered behind the eyes when one stared too long into the fire.

They called him only *the One Who Went Alone.*

And beneath their murmured chants, beneath the songs sung only when the wind was low, a new prayer emerged:

"When the sea opens again,
May he rise from the flood.

Not to save, not to lead,
But to remember."

The Museum was gone.

But the memory of the Intercessor remained—neither alive nor dead, but fixed in the salt and sorrow of those who had waited for someone who could enter the silence and not turn away.

Beneath the waves, far below the surface where light no longer penetrates, the sea rests heavy upon stone. The Museum lies still—its fractured dome now a reef of barnacles and silt, its shattered arches draped with kelp like mourning veils. Fish glide silently through hallways once walked by pilgrims. Statues, warped and weeping, lean into the current. The fresco is gone, dissolved in salt and time.

And deeper still, past corridors collapsed by centuries, past thresholds no longer walked by man or beast, lies the city that no surface-dweller remembers.

The buried city.

Its towers lean inward, not from ruin, but reverence. Streets of black stone snake through silent temples. Lanterns long extinguished still hold the shape of flame in their emptiness. No footsteps echo here, yet something stirs. Not motion—but awareness. The sensation of breath without lungs, of memory without mind.

In a chamber forgotten even by those who built it, water drips from a broken pillar. The sound is soft, rhythmic. A metronome of a world unmeasured by clocks.

A voice speaks.

It is not loud. It does not ripple the sea.

But it is there.

"Lord… how much time do I have?"

No answer comes.

Only the hush of the deep, the slow weaving of currents through the bones of an old world. The voice lingers in the water like ink in glass, then fades. Not erased—only absorbed.

The city remains.